

Thinking - G.W.

## All That and More: The True Purposes of College

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Thank you, Professor Wolpert, for inviting me to give the Common Lecture for this one-of-a-kind course. It is my honor to do so. I am especially pleased to have an opportunity to speak to these young women and men so early in their journey at the University of Florida.

Like all the best journeys, the journey through college can be a destination all its own. I hope my remarks this evening will help make it so for you.

I hope, too, that you will have questions for me after the lecture. This course is very much about questions. It is the only course I know of whose title takes the form of a question. And, ultimately, finding the Good Life involves questioning. Questioning assumptions. Questioning oneself ... Even questioning a university president!

We're only a couple of weeks into the new semester, so you haven't been in this class long enough to answer the question asked in the course title. You may not be sure what the Good Life is. But, I bet you've already figured out what it is not.

Let's see ... watching the bus pass you when you have a 7:25 a.m. exam. Not the Good Life. Getting pulled over by UPD ... on your bicycle. Not the Good Life. Receiving more texts from the UF Alert system than from your friends. Definitely, not the Good Life.

Some of you probably are excited to be in this course. Others may be wondering why you are here ... and looking for someone to blame. I hope we don't get off to a rocky start if I tell you, that person would be me.

I began my tenure as UF president nearly 10 years ago. As time passed, I noticed that the university was like a large city. Diverse. Full of energy. But, everyone living in their own little worlds. The one event that brought students together occurred only on certain fall Saturdays.

I love Gator home games as much as anyone. But with 50,000 students from more than 100 countries studying on this idyllic campus, I wished and hoped students could have more in common than cheering together in a stadium. I wanted them to gather around the playing field of ideas.

"What is the Good Life" is the university's endeavor to foster the common experience of intellectual questioning – the shared life of discovery.

That was how and why the class originated. But "What is the Good Life" has become even more relevant amid the increasing discourse about whether universities should do more to train students for jobs. We hear this concern nationally and in Florida. Here, the public – in particular the Governor – is asking whether we do enough to prepare our students for the job market.

That question is appropriate in light of the tough road facing college graduates. The Associated Press reported recently that 53 percent of recent graduates are jobless or underemployed. Fifty-three percent. All you have to do to appreciate the enormity of that number is think about half of you moving back in with your parents after you graduate. Not the Good Life!

Even if the economy bears some blame, universities are negligent if they don't accept more responsibility here. UF has one of the nation's top-ranked career services centers. We are the leading choice for corporate recruiters. Still, we must do more. As a first step, we are surveying graduates to get a clear idea of their success in finding positions – something we should have been doing all along.

This reassessment and improvement of the college-career connection is clearly needed. But that realization begs another important question: Is job placement all that college is for? What is the purpose of college? Does college have a singular purpose or are there multiple purposes?

Let's think about this objectively and go back to the beginning of higher education in Florida. Why has this state invested millions – even billions – of dollars in building the University of Florida?

UF is a land-grant institution. Abraham Lincoln created these kinds of institutions 150 years ago. And, from what I have read about it, the purposes of land-grant institutions were to advance training and research in agriculture, engineering and the sciences. Preparing students for careers, if you will. And these institutions were to steep students in the deepest considerations of morality, philosophy and ethics. Does that sound familiar? Isn't that the point of "What is the Good Life?"

After my time at UF and six years as president of the University of Utah, I believe that college has many true purposes. Today, I'd like to focus on the question most relevant to you – "What is the Good Life in College?" – with a discussion of three purposes I view as most important for you to address while you are here.

First, I am convinced that your time in college remains the single-best opportunity for you to explore who you are and your purpose in life. Second, college is the best place to begin your career. In these tough times, I can't emphasize career enough. Part of your job in college is to graduate with the ability to get a job.

One way to walk you through each purpose would be to show you how college shaped the lives of famous people.

I figure many of you saw "The Hobbit." You might be interested to know, it was taking Finnish language at Oxford that led J.R.R. Tolkien to become fascinated with languages, including creating his own. That sparked the magical worlds that have fascinated generations of readers. Now that's self-discovery!

Or, I could tell you about Kevin Systrom, the 26-year-old who enrolled in a nine-month entrepreneurship program as an undergraduate at Stanford and went on to start a little company called Instagram. Considering he and his cofounders sold Instagram to Facebook for \$1 billion, that Stanford entrepreneurship program was a great career move by an undergraduate!

And, with regard to contributing to the world: Think of Rachel Carson, author of "Silent Spring," the book that launched the modern environmental movement and celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012. Carson changed her major from English to biology all because of one professor at Pennsylvania College for Women. It was the college major change that has changed the world.

But, as I reflected on today's talk, I realized I didn't want to leave you with the impression that finding the Good Life in College is the purview of a Tolkien, a Systrom or a Carson.

I felt it would be more meaningful to ground my reflections in the experiences of three current UF undergraduates who are just slightly ahead of you on this journey. Far from famous, these students aren't even finished! But, I believe the experience of each embodies one of the three purposes I just outlined – self-discovery, career, and contributing to the world.

I'll begin with a sophomore named Nazeeh Tarsha and his story of self-discovery.

Nazeeh went to Coral Reef Senior High School in Miami, where he was in the academically challenging IB program. Anyone else here from Miami? Too bad we're not gathered at Miami Beach. Now, that would be the Good Life!

Nazeeh excelled in math and science at Coral Reef. He earned a high score on the math portion of the SAT. He hung out with other math and science students.

His parents are immigrants. He is the first in his family to go to college. Everyone expected him to pursue a high-paying career in a technical field like computer programming, and he began UF as an engineering major.

Then, in the spring of his freshman year, Nazeeh took an elective called theatre appreciation. He liked it so much, he took two summer electives in improvisation and acting. Suddenly, he was hooked. In fact, he found himself devoting his spare time to reading unassigned plays, just for the sheer pleasure of it.

This past fall, Nazeeh faced a critical choice: Continue in the path he and his parents always predicted, or make a radical turn. On September 15, Nazeeh auditioned as an acting major. Three weeks later, he checked his email at 4 a.m. and found out he was accepted. It was all he could do to stop himself from shaking his roommates awake to give them his news!

I did not tell Nazeeh's story to urge you to follow his footsteps into acting. Nor can I claim that Nazeeh's choice will lead to fame or financial bounty.

Although ... for the record ... UF counts among its former students actress Faye Dunaway, the band members in Sister Hazel and the movie director Jonathan Demme.

Demme is best known for directing *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Philadelphia*. He came to UF hoping to be a veterinarian and then couldn't pass chemistry. But that's a story for another speech!

I told you Nazeeh's story because he made a couple of decisions I hope you will repeat. One, he took classes that had nothing to do with his background or major. Two, he paid attention when those classes told him something profound about himself.

The poet Robert Frost once said, "College is a refuge from hasty judgment." I hope you will follow Nazeeh's example, and think of Frost's words, as you continue your journey.

OK. I think we can agree that if you enjoy what you do, you are more likely to be a success. So, those of you who experience self-discovery in college are already a step toward the second true purpose of college, finding a career.

Even if you now have no idea what career you want to pursue, there is much you can do beginning now to pave the way for your first job. Much you can do to minimize the chance that you will move back in with your parents!

It starts with getting informed. With your options still wide open, you owe it to yourselves to learn which bachelor's degrees lead to the most job opportunities and the best pay.

Many UF graduates stay in Florida. Here, demand for graduates with degrees in science, technology, engineering and math – the so-called STEM fields – is soaring.

In fact, the State of Florida has estimated that Florida will need 120,000 new professionals in these fields by 2018. STEM job openings increased 14 percent last year over the previous year, to more than 65,000 positions. And, this in a slow economy!

STEM occupations include nursing, web development, accounting, systems engineering and financial analysis. Not only do these fields have the most open positions, they also tend to pay more.

This information matters if salary is your goal. But even if it's not, it will help you to get informed about what lies ahead. And not just informed, but also **prepared**.

Because of the rapidly changing global economy, jobs that are in high demand today may be less-valued tomorrow. In your own lifetimes, advances in technology have transformed careers in journalism, which used to deliver the news on something called newsprint. Technology has also transformed the music industry, which once controlled the distribution of popular music; and finance, where stock trading was once done by human beings who earned commissions and is now done mostly on-line.

This rapid change means you not only need to think about jobs, you also need to think about **skills**. What **skills** can you develop that will help you get a job, whatever field you enter?

That question brings me to my next UF student, a Miami resident and senior named Melissa Eizagaechavarria.

An accomplished pianist in high school, Melissa began at UF as a music major who expected to transition to pre-med and head off to medical school.

Music at UF, however, required hours of solitary practicing, and biology entailed lots of memorization. Melissa disliked both practicing and memorization. By contrast, she found she excelled at the on-the-fly problem solving demanded by her physics with calculus class.

Melissa began her junior year without a clear idea of her future. But when a Thanksgiving trip to the National Air and Space Museum proved inspirational, she decided to try aerospace and mechanical engineering. Luckily, that decision proved exactly right.

Like physics with calculus, aerospace and mechanical engineering classes put a premium not on memorizing facts, but on **conceptualizing and solving problems**. What's more, engineering relies on **teamwork**, a skill that feels natural to Melissa. Rather than spending hours alone with her piano or a biology textbook, she stays up all night solving problems with her friends on the whiteboards in their apartments.

Today, Melissa has summer internship possibilities at Boeing, Pratt & Whitney and Honeywell, and she's confident of her professional future.

The take-home message is this: Discovering and developing your skills in college – for Melissa, problem-solving and teamwork – may be just the way to identify the career that will work for you. If you are looking for a **career**, start by looking at **yourself**.

Recruiters for companies prefer new employees with the skills of **critical thinking, writing, problem-solving, communication and teamwork**. Which of these can you develop as your own strengths?

Whether it is a profession like medicine, teaching or engineering, or a field like business, real estate or construction, you need to match your interests and abilities with the skills required for success. It's all part of the journey.

Ultimately, preparing for your career is about so much more than jobs and income.

As the educator and author Peter Drucker wrote, "Work is an extension of personality. It is achievement." It is one of the ways in which a person measures his or her worth and humanity."

So far, I have devoted my thoughts to how students can make the most of the college experience for themselves. First, the process of self-discovery. Next, steps to career.

Now, I would like to turn to that third true purpose of college: Contributing to the larger world.

David Foster Wallace, the late author of the acclaimed 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*, captured the essence of this idea. He said that college is a place where you can learn, quote, "to be aware that there are other realities outside yourself – so you don't walk around in a bubble of certainty that your universe is the only one."

With that thought in mind, let me turn to the third student I want to tell you about today, a senior named Stuart Block from right here in Gainesville.

Stuart's dad and brother were college football players, and he played tennis in high school. He started UF as a sports management major with hopes of becoming a sports agent – a-la Tom Cruise as Jerry Maguire – or perhaps entering a career in business.

Then, in the fall of his sophomore year, Stuart took a class in sustainability. He was captivated by renewable energy and its promise of clean energy and reducing carbon emissions.

It wasn't long before he changed his major to one newly created at UF: "Sustainability in the built environment." By junior year, he was supplementing classes with his own extracurricular project: Installing solar cells on the roof of his fraternity, Beta Theta Pi.

Today, the outcome of Stuart's project is a 10-kilowatt, \$44,000 system that is only the **second** solar installment on a fraternity **in this country**. With just one semester before he graduates, Stuart made his fraternity more environmentally sustainable **and** built his resume toward a business career with a focus on energy.

Too often, we are told that we have two choices for life's direction – personal success or sacrifice for a greater cause. As Stuart's experience shows, this is a false dichotomy. We can shape lives that combine **personal ambition and social good**.

As the late Katherine Graham said, "To love what you do and feel that it matters – how could anything be more fun?"

I think Stuart is well on his way to that happy balance. So, too, are Nazeeh and Melissa. Whether they will remain in their paths I can't say – their journeys continue. But to me, they have each found their way to the Good Life in College.

Stuart, Nazeeh, and Melissa were not afraid to question themselves or their initial ideas of what they would do while at UF. As you discover your life's direction, find a career and learn to pursue the greater good, I hope that you, too, will **keep asking questions**.

And now, I invite you to ask your questions **of me**. Thank you.

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